

Chris Tandazo's Testimony for Subcommittee Hearing on the Impacts of Plastic on Environmental Justice Communities

Senate Environment and Public Works (EPW)

Subcommittee on Chemical Safety, Waste Management, Environmental Justice, and Regulatory Oversight

Chair: Jeff Merkley

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Good morning everyone. And thank you to Senator Merkley for the invitation to testify this morning. My name is Chris tandazo; I use they/them pronouns; I'm the Statewide Environmental Justice Organizer with the New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance.

The New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance, NJEJA for short, is a twenty-year-old statewide environmental justice organization in New Jersey that works in coalition with grassroots partners to identify, prevent, reduce, and/or eliminate environmental injustices in our communities. NJEJA is led and staffed by majority people of color, who are also members of the communities burdened by polluting facilities and toxic infrastructure.

NJEJA, alongside other environmental justice advocates, collectively advocated for and led the way in the passage of the landmark New Jersey Environmental Justice Law (S232). The primary purpose of the EJ law is to require the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) to evaluate the environmental and public health impacts on overburdened communities when reviewing permit applications for certain facilities. NJDEP has the authority to deny or condition certain permits due to the cumulative impacts of pollution.

I immigrated to Irvington, NJ, when I was 15, where I lived till my late 20s. Living in Irvington, the presence of industrial facilities, trucks, and warehouses was and remains a regular everyday sight, which made me accustomed to living in pollution and seeing this as "normal." It was so normalized that I didn't think to challenge the presence of these environmental injustices. It wasn't until I had the opportunity to attend graduate school that I learned about Environmental Justice and the grassroots movement that has courageously fought for the health and safety of our communities. I realized how my life, my health, and the well-being of my family and my entire community had been, and continue to be, impacted by the presence of toxic pollutants that are detrimental to human health, to our health.

When I think of plastic waste, I think of the environmental justice communities at the frontline and backend of the plastic crisis that have directly and disproportionately

experienced the harms of the entire life-cycle of plastics, from the extraction of fossil fuels for plastic production, to the exposure of toxic chemicals when using plastics, to the disposal of plastic waste at landfills or incinerators in EJ communities. The plastic crisis is particularly acute in places like Cancer Alley in Louisiana, where the petrochemical industry has exposed Black communities to high levels of toxins, causing extreme rates of cancer-related illnesses and deaths. Some of these toxins come from the fossil fuels used to make plastic, but industry also adds many unnecessary toxins for color, rigidity, texture, etc., increasing the toxicity of the plastic and making it impossible to recycle. As plastic waste generation increases, so does the need to dispose of it. At this stage, the plastic crisis arrives at our front door in New Jersey. New Jersey is home to three incinerators. All of these are located in low-income communities of color, in Camden, Rahway, and Newark, where the incinerators burn the plastic waste from New Jersey and many neighboring states, alongside all other types of waste.

Burning waste, especially plastic waste, creates even more toxins that severely impact the health of our communities, such as volatile organic compounds, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and particulate matter. These toxins are endocrine disruptors, damage reproductive and neurological systems, and increase the risk of cardiovascular and respiratory-related illnesses for our communities, which are already overburdened by other polluting infrastructure and socio-economic challenges. Burning trash to generate a small amount of energy has incredibly high costs, including my health. Additionally, a recent study by Earth Justice noted that from 2004 to 2022, New Jersey ratepayers have paid over \$60 million in renewable energy credit subsidies to the incinerators in New Jersey. I don't know about you, but it does not sit well with me that our communities, my family, and myself, have been paying the incinerators in New Jersey to pollute us, to sacrifice us to a slow death.

The current disposal of plastic waste in our communities is a manifestation of environmental racism present in zoning policies that allow for the siting of incinerators, waste infrastructure, and petrochemical industries in communities similar to mine throughout the country. Our communities have become a disposal site for plastic waste, a sacrifice zone. We don't need incinerators, and we can't live with plastics being burned or disposed of in our backyard. We collectively urge this body to take proactive steps toward plastic reduction to alleviate the burden our communities face.

Thank you for your time and for asking me to testify today.